

# A Bird in the Hand

By ELLIS PARKER BUTLER, Author of "Pigs Is Pigs."

It was the Wilbur's first Thanksgiving day in their new home on Long Island, and the first they had spent away from the old home of one or the other of them, and when they first realized that they were to be unable to go down to Vermont, or out to Ohio, they decided that they must have some lonely city friend out to eat Thanksgiving dinner. Amelia proposed six or eight names, and Arthur suggested eight or ten more, and when they asked these, one after the other, they learned for the first time how many New Yorkers have old homes where they are accustomed to spend Thanksgiving. The people the Wilbur's knew seemed inclined to spend Thanksgiving anywhere but on Long Island. They received nothing but kind and firm refusals of their well-meant invitations, and at last Amelia said:

"Well, Arthur, why don't you invite Mr. Foster? He is all alone. His family is all in Europe, and he is too old, I am sure, to have any fathers or mothers in New England, and I think it would be nice to ask him."

"Heavens, Amelia!" her husband exclaimed. "Ask Mr. Foster? Why, he would be the last man I would think of asking."

"And isn't he the last man?" asked Amelia. "Haven't we asked all the rest? Just because he is your employer, and lives in a big hotel, is no reason why you should not take pity on his loneliness and try to make his Thanksgiving day a happy one. Now, you ask him tomorrow," she continued brightly, "and if he will come he will be sure to enjoy it. And if he will not come he will see that we think something of him besides what we think of him as your employer."

"All right," said Arthur. "If you are not afraid to have him, I am not. But you know he is a real New Yorker. I will want that he was born and raised right here in New York, and that he knows no more about what a real Thanksgiving day is than a Frenchman would. You will have to bear your own disappointment, young lady, if he doesn't fall into the spirit of the thing."

"Fudge!" exclaimed little Mrs. Wilbur lightly. "I guess no man can fail to enter into the spirit of a good dinner, no matter on what day it is served to him, and I will have a dinner that will make him wish he did not live in a hotel. I will write to father that we are to have company for dinner and what Anna and I can do to one of father's turkeys will surprise Mr. Foster."

So the next day Arthur Wilbur invited Mr. Foster to eat Thanksgiving dinner with them, and Mr. Foster agreed!

Mr. Foster was a genuine New Yorker. He lived in a hotel, and he dressed like a fashion plate. He gave the waiters, always, a good fat tip when he ate, and he expected the best service in return. He was the kind of New Yorker that runs in grooves, in pleasant grooves, but in grooves, and the general impression is that that kind of New Yorker will never willingly get out of his grooves, and that if he does get out he is lost and miserable. He was the kind of New Yorker that you cannot imagine willingly straying above One Hundredth street. When he agreed to cross the raging East river and spend a whole afternoon in a suburb Arthur Wilbur was thoroughly surprised. Mrs. Wilbur was not. She and her young wife and she could not imagine a man who would not rather spend an afternoon in her home than anywhere else, and she accepted his coming as calmly as she would have accepted the coming of any of the other men Arthur had asked. She wrote the letter to her father in Vermont, telling him that she expected to have company for dinner, and asking him to send his best turkey, and she went on with her other preparations just as if Mr. Foster had been a common man, and not Arthur's employer.

Thanksgiving day morning was fine and cold. Mr. Foster was to arrive on the 12:10 train, and Amelia and Anna had everything ready but the turkey by the time the clock struck 9. The turkey had not arrived, but it was on the way. Anna, the servant, was a Polish, and she spoke little English. True, she made amends by being able to understand still less, but a sign language, however useful in some cases, is a poor substitute for speech when one tries to tell a third party what a first party has said, when the second party has not understood the first party and the third party cannot understand the second. The expressman had brought the turkey the day before Thanksgiving, but Anna had been alone in the house and had no money to pay the express charges, so the man had told her he would come back. Anna tried to tell all this to Mrs. Wilbur by signs, but the attempt was a failure and Mrs. Wilbur was upset. When it comes to 10 o'clock on Thanksgiving day and dinner set for 1 o'clock and no turkey in the house and none left in the town it is a matter that would make any housewife nervous.

Mr. Wilbur was on his way to the express office. He had telephoned and the man had said he did not know whether there was a package for a Mr. Wilbur or not. He said the wagon was out now and that when it returned he would ask the driver. It was Thanksgiving day and the driver was only delivering parcels as a favor. If he happened to get tired before he got them all delivered he would not deliver the rest until the next day. As for the man that was talking, he was just waiting for the driver to come back. He did not belong in the express office. He was the driver's cousin from New Jersey.

When Mr. Wilbur heard this much he slapped up the receiver and told Amelia that he was going to run down to the express office and see if the turkey had come, and if it had not he would telephone her. When he reached the express office he found the driver had not yet returned and he telephoned Amelia that he would stay there until he did return, unless Amelia telephoned him that the driver had delivered the turkey at the house. He said that it was all right, for the cousin from New Jersey had let him look over the way-bills and that the turkey had arrived and was now either in the express office or on the wagon somewhere in the town. As soon as the driver returned, if he had not delivered the turkey, he would bring it to the house at once, and that was all he could do, for there was not another turkey in the town. He had stopped at all the places where a turkey might be expected to be purchasable, and there was not one left.

The hands of the clock moved around and Amelia did not telephone, and the expressman did not return to his office. At ten minutes of 12 Mr. Wilbur swore the cousin from New Jersey to faith-

ful agreement that he would see that the express driver returned with the turkey it should be delivered to Mr. Wilbur's house, and Mr. Wilbur ran all the way to the station, reaching it just as the train pulled in. He almost prayed that Mr. Foster had missed the train, but Mr. Foster had not missed it. He stepped from the smoker with a cheerful smile and held out his hand to Mr. Wilbur.

"On time, eh?" he asked. "I didn't want to keep that famous dinner waiting. Great little town you have here, Wilbur. I'll eat you out of house and home—didn't get up in time for breakfast this morning—I'll demolish that turkey for you."

He was as happy as a child on a Saturday holiday. He felt that he was doing something unusual and daring in coming so far from Broadway. He was a good-natured man at all times, and he felt especially fatherly coming out like this to eat with one of his young men, and he meant to have a good time of it.

"This is a pretty town," he said as he walked toward the Wilbur's little cottage. "Hope that turkey is a big one, Wilbur. You don't know what a hungry New Yorker can do to a turkey. The way I feel I believe I could almost eat one raw."

"I hope you won't have to wait long, Mr. Foster," said poor Wilbur. "Ah, dinner wasn't just ready when I left home, but I hope—"

Mr. Foster, reassuredly, "I was joking. I guess I can wait a few minutes as well as the next man can. I know all about these turkeys. They have to cook just so long. Wife won't let them out of the oven until they are just so brown—oh, is this where you live? Pretty place, Wilbur."

He excused himself to Mr. Foster and stepped into the kitchen. Mrs. Wilbur closed the door behind him. "Arthur," she said, and I cannot describe the tone in which she said it, "the turkey has not come!"

"By George!" he said, and then, after looking at his wife's face for a moment. "By Jolly!" He sat down on one of the kitchen chairs and stared at her. "Say," he said, soberly, "this won't do you know! Why—there's Mr. Foster in there, you know. Can't you tell me when you begin to get nervous, and then the turkey comes—"

"Do you know how long it takes to roast a turkey?" said Amelia, scornfully. "There is only one thing to do, and that is to pretend that Mr. Foster made a mistake, or that you made a mistake, and that dinner was to be at 6 this evening, instead of at 7. Or else to go to him and tell him the truth, and one of those things you have to do, for I don't know him as well as you do."

"Amelia," said Arthur, sadly, "this is the saddest occasion of my life. To get a born New Yorker out into what he calls the woods on the pretense of giving him a good dinner, and then to tell him that the dinner is postponed, is awful! The man has had no breakfast, Amelia! I—I—oh, well, I suppose I have to do it, but I'd rather be licked. How would you go at it? Would you try to make a joke of it, or would you appear as sad about it as we really are?"

"You know best, dear," she said, sweetly. "I—What was that?" It was unmistakably a wagon drawing up at the front of the house. It was also unmistakably the expressman dragging a heavy case up on the tiny front porch, and ringing the bell, and as they opened the kitchen door to look out, Amelia and Arthur saw Mr. Foster go to the front door and open it. He was trying to enter into the spirit of suburban life and be useful.

"Well, here's your turkey," said the expressman, "99 cents charges. Sorry I couldn't get around any earlier, sir." Mr. Foster looked around doubtfully and caught the eyes of Amelia and Arthur upon him. They immediately stepped out of the kitchen and came to the rescue, but what they saw on the front porch made them gasp. It was the turkey, but it was a living turkey in a cage made of a good-sized dry goods case, and at the first startled view the turkey looked as large and brave as any ostrich. It was, in fact, nearly as large as an ostrich and much braver than any ordinary ostrich. It was Anna's father's best turkey, and dressed it would weigh twenty-five pounds; undressed it must have weighed thirty. Mr. Foster would have guessed its weight "on the hoof" to be about 100. He had never seen such a turkey. He walked around the cage and looked at it with real admiration, while Arthur settled with the expressman.

"Well! Well!" he exclaimed. "I never would have believed that a turkey could get as big as that! Do you know, Mrs. Wilbur, I always had an idea that a turkey was killed and dressed weeks before Thanksgiving day. I suppose that is the way with those we get in town, isn't it? But to think that you have one arrive like this, and then have him ready to serve in a few minutes, makes me begin to think that I have never really eaten turkey as it should be eaten. Well, goodbye, old bird," he said jovially, "I'll see you soon—stuffed!"

It gave Mrs. Wilbur a pang to hear Mr. Foster running on in this happy way, as if he expected to hear the dinner bell ring in about ten minutes, but it made a good opening for her, and she burst into an explanation of the reason why the turkey had been delayed and that it would be necessary to have dinner in the evening instead of at noon, and she assured Mr. Foster that it would not be necessary for him to go without eating on that account, for there was plenty to eat in the house, and she was going to pile one excuse and palliation on top of another, when Mr. Foster interrupted her.

"That's all right!" he assured her. "It suits me all the better. The only thing that made me hesitate at all about coming out here for dinner was that dinner was to be in the middle of the day, and I am accustomed to take mine in the evening. Now I am perfectly happy and glad I came, and you can just give me a small bite of something

for lunch, and then I will be all right until dinner is ready, and whether it is at 7 or 11 tonight makes no difference to me."

"It is no wonder that when Arthur dragged the cageful of turkey around the house and Amelia came out to take another look at it she should tell him that she was absolutely in love with Mr. Foster, and that she thought him the nicest, real New Yorker she had ever met."

The lunch was good, as it should have been with all the trimmings of the Thanksgiving dinner to choose from, and when Mr. Foster settled himself in the big chair in the parlor with a good cigar between his teeth he felt like a boy. Not because he was smoking, of course, but because there was something so different from hotel life in the happy-go-lucky way he was spending the day. So when Arthur said that while he would like to sit and smoke with him, but that he really thought he ought to go out and get that turkey ready to cook, Mr. Foster jumped up and asked if he could not go along. He said he had never seen any one get a turkey ready to cook and he would feel better if he stood up and went out of doors, anyway. He was so evidently in earnest that Arthur said he would be glad to have him come, and the two men walked through the house and out to the place where the turkey was awaiting its doom.

Mrs. Wilbur and Polish Anna were already there, looking at the turkey. Mr. Foster took a seat on the top step of the back-stoop and laid his arms comfortably atop of his knees. Mr. Wilbur stood before the cage and looked at the turkey with a frown.

"What do you do first?" asked Mr. Foster, with interest.

"Well, the first thing to do is to kill it," said Arthur. "First catch your turkey and then kill it. Then—say, Amelia, did you know your father was going to send a live turkey?"

"Of course not," she replied, indignantly. "I never thought of such a thing."

"How do you kill it?" asked Mr. Foster.

"Oh," said Arthur absently, for he was examining the cage carefully to see where it was most assailable, "you cut its head off, or wring its neck—"

"Wring its neck!" pleaded Mr. Foster. "Go on and wring its neck. I'd like to see how you wring its neck." The turkey was so much like an ostrich in size that even Arthur laughed. The idea of wringing the neck of a turkey that looked as if it might be able to wrestle with a full-grown man on even terms pleased Mr. Foster, and he laughed heartily.

"The first thing," said Arthur, "is to open this cage some way. Anna, get me the hammer."

Anna looked at Mr. Wilbur a minute and then at Mrs. Wilbur.

"Hammer, hammer," she made the motions that accompany the driving of a nail, and Anna smiled and went cheerfully into the house. Arthur leaned up against the cage and waited.

"That is the worst of living in the suburbs," he said. "We can't get any but raw help. But Anna is learning." She came out with the potato masher, and a self-gratulatory smile.

"No!" exclaimed Arthur, and then, before she could turn back, he changed his mind. "Never mind," he called, "bring that. That will do as well as the hammer."

He took the potato masher from her and then hesitated.

"I don't know that I want to open this cage first, after all," he said, thoughtfully. "If I do the bird will be as likely to come out and walk away as not, and I don't believe any of you would dare to stop it. What I want to do is to get all ready for the slaughter and then open the cage. Now, I need a block to lay the turkey's neck across. I believe there is a block down in the cellar that will—"

He stopped short and looked at Amelia.

"By George!" he cried. "I never thought of that! We have no hatchet! No, sir, we haven't a hatchet or an ax in the place!"

"How do you chop your wood?" asked Mr. Foster, who was having the best time he had had for years.

"We use coal and gas," said Arthur, seriously. "We heat with coal and we cook with gas. I wonder—I wonder if I could use a carving knife?"

He walked around the cage and looked at the turkey critically.

"I don't believe you could kill that gentle creature with a carving knife," said Mr. Foster. "I don't believe you would dare attack it with a hatchet."

"Well, that is a fact," admitted Arthur, frankly. "I shouldn't unless it was a very sharp hatchet. And the I should want the three of you to hold the turkey while I wielded the weapon."

"The idea!" cried Mrs. Wilbur. "Me hold that turkey, indeed! When you kill it I am going into the house. I don't want to be around."

"And you know, Wilbur," said Mr. Foster, "you can't expect your guests

to do anything like holding a poor defenseless turkey while it is being meanly assassinated."

"And I suppose Anna would give notice on the spot and go up to pack her trunk if I so much as hinted that I expected her to hold it. A nice way to kill a turkey, isn't it? You expect me to hold the bird with one hand and saw its head off with a carving knife with the other! And a turkey as big as an emu, at that!"

"Why don't you shoot it?" asked Mr. Foster.

Arthur cheered up immediately. "I'll do that!" he cried. "Just wait until I go up and get my revolver and I'll be right down." He disappeared into the house. The turkey calmly poked its head between the slats of the cage and picked a bit of something from the ground. Arthur returned with his revolver.

"Now," he said, cocking it. Then he walked up to the turkey and looked at it. "I wonder where this bird's heart would be, anyway?" he said anxiously. "I don't want to rouse the whole neighborhood and have the police down upon us for cruelty to animals. I don't want to shoot this bird full of holes and then only half kill it. If I knew where the heart was—"

"It's heart is in the highlands," quoted Mr. Foster cheerily. "Shoot it in the highlands, Wilbur."

Arthur got on his knees beside the cage and pointed the revolver at the side of the turkey. The turkey stuck its head between the slats and looked at Arthur with curiosity. Mrs. Wilbur covered her ears with her hands, and Arthur closed his eyes and pulled the trigger. Nothing happened. He opened his eyes and looked at the revolver. There were no cartridges in it.

"I tell you what!" he said, getting up. "I can't shoot that turkey. I can't shoot it that way. I feel like a murderer. If I could let it out of the cage, and give it a fair start, I shouldn't feel so much like an assassin, but I couldn't hit it then. I feel like a man who would load a cannon and then lead a helpless little squirrel up in front of it. I can't shoot that turkey."

"Well, Arthur," said Amelia, "you will have to kill it some way, and soon, too. It has to be picked and cleaned and stoved after you kill it, and it is now about 2 o'clock. And a bird that size will have to cook for three hours. That will make it 7 o'clock, at least, if you kill it this very minute, before we have dinner. If we are to have dinner at 7 I shall have to get the turkey in the oven—"

She stopped speaking and looked at Arthur aghast.

"Why? Why?" she faltered. "Why? We can't let that turkey in our oven! Our oven will only hold a twelve-pound turkey!"

Arthur sat down on the steps and twirled the revolver around his thumb. He said nothing, but the way he looked at the gravel walk was enough.

Mr. Foster stood up. It was evidently no moment for a born New Yorker to intrude on the privacy of a suburban family. "Oh, by George!" he exclaimed. "You have a telephone, haven't you, Wilbur? I just this moment thought of a man I want to telephone to."

"You are not going home, are you?" asked Arthur without spirit.

"No, sir," laughed Mr. Foster. "I live in a hotel. I have no home. No, sir, I am having the time of my life—I am going to stay here and eat turkey if I have to stay until Christmas. I am going to see this thing through."

"Isn't he fine?" said Mrs. Wilbur, ecstatically, which is next door to hysterically.

"He is," answered Arthur, without a smile, "but what are we going to do about this turkey? Can't you cut it up in pieces, some way, and broil it, or stew it, or something?"

"You silly!" she laughed. "And it isn't dead yet, anyway!"

They were still thinking hard, and Anna was looking on with wide open eyes and thinking how different are the customs of Poland and America, when Mr. Foster came out, dropping his watch into his vest pocket as he came.

"Wilbur," he said, "do you mind walking over to the station with me?"

"Oh! You are not going?" cried Mrs. Wilbur. "I can get up something for dinner. We have a steak and—"

"Steak on Thanksgiving day!" exclaimed Mr. Foster. "No, indeed! You see, I don't mean to go back to town. I just want to walk over to the station and be there when next train pulls in. I telephoned over to the hotel in New York and Stickley, he's the manager, is sending over a roast turkey."

"Mister Foster!" cried Mrs. Wilbur, and he could have taken it to mean that he was interfering in matters that did not concern him and that his interference was resented, or he could have taken it to mean that in Mrs. Wilbur's estimation he was a bit the most thoughtful man in New York, and something in the glistering of her eyes assured him that his interference was not resented, at least.

So the two men walked over to the station and Mrs. Wilbur turned to Anna and told her to go in and lay the tablecloth for dinner.

Anna smiled her ever fatuous smile and hesitated.

"Ain't you not goin' kill the big goose?" she asked.

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